



## SUCCESS STORY

# Not Your Ordinary Summer Camp

Camp for ethnic Roma and Bulgarians resonates with a whole community



Children participate in an interactive exercise as part of the summer camp organized by a Peace Corps Volunteer with a USAID small project grant.

*"The support of USAID invigorated the movement of integration in Samokov. In ten days, we not only transformed our 24 participants, but they inspired us with hope that people of differences can co-exist together in one community."*

*Peace Corps Volunteer Kevin Akiyama used a USAID Small Projects Assistance (SPA) grant to bring ethnic Bulgarian and Roma children together in a unique environment.*

Kevin writes: "Association Svetlina of Samokov put into action our community-generated idea of a ten-day integration camp called *Samo Zaedno* (Only Together) during the summer of 2007. This camp brought together youth participants from the two dominant ethnic groups, Roma and Bulgarian, to participate in discussions about topics like cultural awareness, rights and responsibilities, conflict resolution, and relationship-building. Our goal was to promote mutual acceptance and understanding between Bulgarian and Roma while encouraging healthy family relationships.

Camp *Samo Zaedno* was created because of the staggering number of at-risk families and growing concern about racism, discrimination, and segregation between the Roma and Bulgarian communities in Samokov.

During the preparations, Association Svetlina received as much criticism as support from the local community. But steadfast in our belief in having a unified, peaceful community of differences, the workers and volunteers of Svetlina launched Camp *Samo Zaedno*.

We found ourselves observing unexpected results from our participants. We observed the blossoming of true friendships. Rather than surface-level interaction or dialogue, we observed them teaching and aiding each other during difficult moments. We observed them sharing music, dance, and even language during their free time. In ten short days, we observed a process of coexistence even in light of differences.

Months have passed since Camp *Samo Zaedno*, but stories of the times that we shared together can still be heard in Samokov. Our efforts at community integration echo throughout the town's NGO, educational, and municipal sectors.

A month after the camp, a group of 16 parents and caretakers from the Roma community voluntarily made their way to our association to discuss working together to improve the situation for themselves and their children."